



# Immigrant women's acculturation stress and coping strategies in Korea: A qualitative analysis



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the coping strategies used by migrant women experiencing acculturation stress in Korea. A qualitative content analysis of 20 transcribed individual interviews was used to describe and explore women's experiences of acculturation into a Korean family and Korean culture. The findings could be summarized by the theme "A life with a family rooted in the 2nd homeland," consisting of the following coping strategies: *agreeing on cultural differences, accepting one's limitations, respecting one's own decision, sharing problems, learning about the Korean culture, enjoying one's homeland culture, caring about identity diffusion, and helping survival*. The results showed that the women experienced considerable acculturation stress, and they made tremendous efforts to align themselves with the Korean culture and with women's lives in a Korean family. The processes and strategies that these women used to manage acculturation stress can be used by professionals to develop empirical guidelines to help other women experiencing acculturation stress. More research on various acculturation conditions and populations is required to generalize the results of this study.

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## 1. Introduction

Development of transportation and globalization has facilitated international exchange, immigration, and marriages worldwide, and more specifically, in Asian nations. Since the 1990s, this phenomenon has led to the emergence of a new pattern of international marriage in which young women from China, Vietnam, or the Philippines immigrate to Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, or South Korea for marriage (Tsai, 2011). Sociologists interpret this pattern to be related to the socioeconomic context in the host nation, such as decrease in birth rate, increase in sex ratio, and decrease in the availability of agricultural labor force (Kim, 2006).

The rate of international marriage between foreign women and Korean men has been increasing every year. According to a 2012 survey, 124,584 women immigrated to Korea owing to marriage with Korean men (Statistics Korea, 2012). The majority of these married immigrant women are from developing countries, and therefore, they need assistance in adjusting to life in Korean families (Kim, 2007; Kim, 2010). The nationality of these women varies, with approximately 80% of them from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia, and the remaining from Thailand, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Russia, Nepal, Pakistan, Japan, Canada, and the USA (Statistics Korea, 2011).

Women married to Korean men experience acculturation stress while undertaking the roles of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, to meet their own familial expectations (Jang, 2010; Kim, 2007). These women experience problems with

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various aspects of life, including language and communication, child rearing and education, conflict with the spouse's family, and the Korean food and weather (Kim, 2010). Sixteen percent of these women are at high risk for developing mental health problems; those with lower economic status have poorer mental health (Jeong, 2007; Roh & Kim, 2012). Acculturation stress in immigrant women affects community mental health; specifically, the higher the acculturative stress, the greater the anxiety, depression, alienation, and identity diffusion experienced in the multicultural family (Kim, 2009; Lee et al., 2013). Further, the extent of mental health problems experienced in a multicultural family is serious. They may result in family conflict, domestic violence, or risky behaviors such as substance use, sexual abuse, and suicide (Jeong, Kim, & Bae, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to explore acculturative stress, define its associated factors, and develop strategies for its early detection and intervention (Kim & Lee, 2013; Rho & Kim, 2012).

The present study was a part of a 2-year project designed to explore mental health issues of international marriage immigrant women in Korea using a qualitative approach, and to develop a mental health improvement program for these women. The ultimate purpose of the project was to provide empirical evidence to support the immigrant women in adjusting to a Korean family and the Korean society, using activities of community gatekeepers to help the women effectively manage acculturation stress. The present study was a part of the first-year project that specifically focused on acculturation stress management and investigated the strategies employed by these women to manage acculturation stress, using a qualitative approach. The purpose of this study was to describe and explore international marriage immigrant women's strategies to manage their acculturation stress. Increased knowledge about how immigrant women manage acculturation stress would be essential for creating the resources required for the second-year project, which aims to develop a mental health improvement program for these women.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

This study was designed using inductive, interpretative, and constructionist methods based on qualitative content analysis. This is a method aiming to provide new knowledge and understanding of phenomena as well as a concrete guide to actions (Krippendorff, 2004). Though qualitative content analysis has been described as lacking a solid theoretical background, it is often used in healthcare research because it has been considered appropriate for identifying meaningful concepts, especially in terms of similarities and differences in a text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This approach guided the research process used to explore the subjective experiences, examine meanings of the experiences, compare these meanings, and construct concepts illustrating the unique experiences of international marriage immigrant women.

### 2.2. Participants and settings

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling, through personal contacts and from multicultural community service centers. Women were included in this study if they had immigrated to Korea through marriage with Korean men, had been living in Korea for at least six months, and had no acute physical or psychological problems. Women were excluded if they were under 18 years of age or were divorced from their Korean husband. Initially, 30 women were recruited for the interview and 26 of them were eligible, but six women were unable to undergo in-depth interviews because of visits to their homeland or because their husbands refused to allow them to participate in the study.

The Korean husbands of the immigrant women were often anxious and reluctant to have their wives meet strange people. The researchers understood this situation and carefully conducted interviews as well as concentrated on attaining data saturation with as small a sample as possible. Finally, 20 women were purposefully selected until saturation, defined as the point at which similar data were repeated and a certain pattern of data reemerged during the interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, the eligibility rate was 86.7%, and the participation rate was 76.9%.

### 2.3. Ethical considerations

The participants were explained the research purpose and process, and were informed that they could refuse or withdraw participation at any point, without any negative consequences to themselves. Only women who understood the conditions of the study and provided written informed consent were allowed to participate. The consent forms were in both Korean and the participants' mother tongue. This study was approved by the institutional review board of Chung-Ang University.

### 2.4. Data collection

Qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants from February 2014 to October 2014. The interviews started with the question "How would you describe your acculturation process during adjustment after immigration into Korea and living with your Korean husband, children, and spouse's family?" Follow-up questions focused on the women's experiences regarding coping and strategies to manage acculturation stress. The questions were intended to facilitate an open discussion regarding the women's experiences of acculturation stress and to explore aspects of their related experiences. The participants were encouraged to describe their experiences in their own words. The interviews were conducted in counseling

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